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ABSTRACT

As a result of an influx of foreign students, and an assessment of student attitudes toward communicating with foreign students, a survey of foreign students at South Dakota State University was conducted to determine their needs in and problems with the basic speech course. Sixty-six surveys were returned. The results indicated that by far the majority of all students who normally take the basic course are in the lecture-lab format. The university does offer conventional sections in the summer, however, and foreign students flock to those sessions. The content of these two formats is the same, but foreign students indicated a preference for the conventional sections, possibly because this format is more conducive to interpersonal relationships, or because the students can choose the instructor. Few foreign students indicated that they felt different or at a disadvantage because of language deficiencies. Their complaints about the course echoed those of their American counterparts: the course is hard but fair. Based on these responses, the program will undergo little immediate change. (Copies of the foreign student survey and a survey of American students' attitudes toward communicating with foreign students are appended.) (HTH)

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NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH IN THE BASIC SPEECH COURSE

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CS 505 170

A decade-long teaching career has been spent in the Midwest, mostly in South Dakota. To say that our climate is conservative and the normal student population homogeneous is an understatement. While teaching any student is a challenge of individuality, teaching a homogeneous group has led me to a certain complacence about my responsibility to the student. In other words, we were the same and that made the educational process simpler.

About five years ago, the complexion of the university student literally changed. This change was in some cases dramatic. By 1984 fall semester, non-native speakers of English numbered 364, and represented forty-five countries.[1] These "foreign" students comprised slightly over 5 percent of the student population. While this figure is low, it represents a significant change from the status quo.

This change affected both students and faculty. Our general student body is mildly resentful of the influx, especially since they "Know" that foreign students are treated differently, perhaps with greater leniency. This is not borne out to the best of my knowledge, and certainly is not the case in the basic speech course.

To determine if students could identify traits in foreign students which led them (native speakers of English) to "have problems with" foreign students, I asked an Interpersonal Communication class (sophomore level) to indicate these troublesome traits. This list is found as

Appendix A. In personal conversations, many native students are far less kind about their foreign counterparts.

My own reaction to the influx of foreign students paralleled, with less intensity, that of the students. I can, in retrospect, define myself as "culturally myopic" or "xenophobic" or both. After an occupational change here, becoming Coordinator of the Basic Course, it seemed warranted to examine the relationship between native students and faculty and our counterparts from other cultures. The examination was also prompted by the myopia which seemed to persist, at least personally. During this influx of non-native speakers, I assumed that the basic speech course would present problems for the "foreign" students. That is, it seemed reasonable to conclude that foreign students would be uncomfortable with the basic speech course. Our staff policy about Speech 101 is very stringent, and the oft heard complaint ("everyone says it") is that the foreign student was at a disadvantage because of "language" barriers. Like most professional faculties, I contend that the problem that we have in listening to foreign students is not language use, but delivery. In discussions with both staff and students, this general perception seems to hold true.

Confronted with a nagging myopic or xenophobic feeling that something must be wrong, I decided to survey the foreign students in the basic course to determine their

perceptions and needs. Part of this research was prompted by the 1984 Midwest Basic Course Directors Conference, at which it was determined that the pursuit was worthy.

Ostensibly, the needs of the foreign student in the basic course should be a matter of professional record. However, a survey of the Index to Journals in Communication Studies Through 1979 revealed nothing dealing with this aspect of the study.[2] Similarly, a cursory survey of Communication Education since that time revealed nothing. A computer search was also completed which included a survey of ERIC resources. Surprisingly, the search, which indicated thousands of resources in speech communication/curriculum/communication competency, etc., yielded no citations which dealt with oral communication instruction for the non-native speaker of English, or the foreign student. Teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) was the exception, but outside the purview of the basic speech course.

To determine the needs of the foreign student in the basic course and to place his/her perspective of the basic course into some framework, a survey was devised. Initially, the project was designed to aid our basic program. Therefore, the instrument is open to some question. However, the responses are enlightening, at least for our course, which has a public speaking emphasis. The survey was administered to all foreign students taking the

basic course in the spring of 1984, summer of 1984, and fall of 1984. Sixty-six surveys were returned, the majority of which reflected summer school enrollment. No attempt was made to determine percentage of return, since the study was initiated as an internal assessment. I can safely say that the return rate was substantial. A copy of the survey is attached as Appendix B.

Demographics of the sample

Since the survey paralleled another done in South Dakota, certain demographic variables were identified.[3] By far, the majority of the sample was over twenty-one years of age (62). Most of this group fell into the 21-23 age group (31). As might be expected, most were single (58). Males outnumbered females more than six to one.

Eighteen of the forty-five countries represented on campus were represented in the sample. One-half of the respondents were from Malaysia, compared with less than one-third in the student population. This can be explained by the recent and continuing influx of Malaysian students.

Only three of those surveyed were U.S. citizens, but 20 percent intended to become U.S. citizens. One response to this item was "Never." Half of those who responded had lived elsewhere in the U.S. before coming to SDSU, most of them less than one year, and all under four years.

Class standing of the group varied considerably, even though Speech Communication 101 is the entry level course. The breakdown is as follows:

Freshman	6
Sophomore	15
Junior	19
Senior	25
Graduate student	1

This can be explained: the basic speech course is no place for the beginning foreign student; many students have been in other programs and have transferred into a program; and seniors may have realized that Speech Communication 101 is a requirement for graduation. The sole graduate student is a M.A. student in the Departament of Speech. Our department reserves the right to require foreign graduate students to demonstrate proficiency in oral communication.

Since the perceived "problem" in the basic course is with language, the survey attempted to determine the level of language proficiency attained by the foreign, or non-native speaker. Their own languages varied as much or more than their native countries. Malaysian students, for instance, may speak native Malay; Chinese; or Tamil, an Indian language. Unlike many American students, foreign students may be bilingual, excluding English. For example, a foreign student from Malaysia may speak both Malay and Chinese. Other Oriental students similarly have a

combination of Chinese with dialect differences of Mandarin and Cantonese. Bilingual training is also reflected in the language groupings of Cameroon students, who speak French and English routinely. Arabic and its variations are commonly cited as the primary language of Middle East students here.

Since the "problem" with foreign students in the basic course perceptually stems from language differences, it was important to determine the amount of training these students obtained in English. The results are startling. The shortest length of English language training reported was six months. This minimum training was tempered by the extreme: several respondents reported training in excess of five years. One respondent indicated that English language training began at the age of seven. Years of training reported included ten, thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. Subsequent conversations with Malaysian students confirmed that English training began early and continued throughout their formal education. It is obvious that this group of foreign students had extensive training in English as a second language.

Academic major was another concern of the survey, although it was presumed that most respondents would be from the College of Engineering. Fifty-seven of those surveyed were enrolled in engineering curriculum. Over two-thirds of the foreign student population also falls into this

category. Only one respondent who was Malaysian cited a major emphasis other than engineering. The remaining respondents were scattered across other majors, with no discernible or significant pattern of enrollment.

Respondents were also asked to indicate when they first took the basic speech course. The results, by semester, were as follows:

Semester	Responses
1	3
2	9
3	15
4	8
5	4
6	9
7	5
8	4
Other	6
No Response	3

This contradicts the earlier data which indicated that forty-four students took the course in their junior or senior years. Students may have reported the semester in residence at SDSU. It was expected that even more respondents would take the basic course later in their academic careers. It seems that the higher numbers who took the course in their second, third, or fourth semesters can be attributed to the influx of Malaysian students, who are

better prepared for the class. Only twelve of those surveyed had taken the course previously; only one of these had taken the course twice previously.

Those surveyed were also asked to respond to their interactions with other students and with the instructor. Student-student interactions are summarized below:

Response	Number
Excellent	5
Very Good	24
Good	26
Fair	7
Poor	4
Very Poor	0

The general reason for this perception, that is, of the positive inter-actions, according to the students, was that the classes encouraged interactions. Those responding positively also commented that they were often of the same group and this encouraged interaction. Reasons for negative responses included comments about racism and ignorance (on the part of American students).

Surprisingly, the student-instructor interaction ratings were higher. They are summarized below:

Response	Number
Excellent	17
Very Good	25
Good	17
Fair	7
Poor	0
Very Poor	0

The positive nature of these comments was reflected in the willingness of the instructor to help and to create an atmosphere of mutual respect. Many students also commented about the humor of the instructors.

Part of the willingness to help on the part of the instructors was documented in the students' responses to interpersonal contact with the instructor. Students were asked the frequency with which they met with the instructor. Forty-one of the respondents indicated they contacted the instructor whenever they needed help. Only eight reported seldom contact and five never met with the instructor. The other respondents reported periodic meetings.

Only ten students responded that they often sought help from other students in the class, a surprising finding since some of the Summer 1984 classes were predominantly foreign students of Malaysian heritage. Thirty-five reported that they seldom contacted other students in the class for help. Fifty-nine of the respondents reported that they seldom or

never sought help from students who had formerly taken Speech 101.

The survey also asked the format of the speech course taken by the students. Our course is divided into a lecture-lab format and one which includes a conventional approach--meetings with a single instructor. Only thirteen responded that they were in the lecture-lab class. Twenty-eight responded that they were in the conventional classes and twenty-five made no response. An analysis of class rolls showed most of these to be in conventional summer session classes.

Conclusion

If the response to the last item (format) is an indication, the results of the survey are muddied somewhat. By far the majority of students who normally take the basic course are in the lecture-lab format. We do, however, offer conventional sections in the summer and foreign students flock to summer speech classes. This format is more conducive to interpersonal relationships, with both the instructor and other students. The content of the class is the same, despite the format, but foreign students seem to prefer the summer or, alternatively, the conventional format. The lecture-lab format is a blind draw for instructor assignment, so the student does not know until the first day of class who the instructor is. The

conventional sections often have the instructor's name printed in the schedule. As can be expected, instructors get reputations about their teaching, and I would hypothesize that this leads many foreign students to prefer the conventional sections.

When the process of this study began, I assumed that foreign students would be somewhat hostile toward the course, the instructors, and their colleagues. Gratefully, this was not the case. Many students offered comments about what could be changed, but for the most part they were comments about too much library work or the value of the texts. Few students responded that they felt different or at a disadvantage because of proficiency in the language. It was to be expected that some foreign students felt that their American colleagues were uncomfortable, racist or ignorant. However, most American students who have had extreme exposure to the foreign student in the basic course come away from the experience refreshed. It was the intent of the survey to determine the needs of the foreign students in the basic course. However, their complaints about the course are echoed by their American counterparts. The course is hard but fair, and from the responses to this survey, there will be no immediate changes.

ENDNOTES

[1] Foreign Student Directory, Fall Semester, 1984, SDSU, compiled by the foreign student advisor's office.

[2] Ronald J. Matlon, compiler, Index to Journals in Communication Studies through 1979 (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1980).

[3] Norman H. Watson and Michael R. Schliessmann, "Relational Communication Needs and Desires of International Students in American Colleges and Universities." Paper presented at the First Annual Intercultural Communication Conference on Latin America and the Caribbean, December, 1983.

APPENDIX A

Stereotypic traits of foreign students

The traits are listed from five groups of IPC students.

wealthy
intelligent in math and science
smoke a lot
eat in groups
Islamic
major in engineering
dark hair
closer physical and eye contact
skinny
speak their own language
help each other in classes
governmentally funded
rich, drive nice cars
religious
play soccer
bargain for grades, etc.
live in Annex
dress well
grades are important
smell
like women
opinionated about Americans
mostly male
feel discriminated against here
hate American food
all named Mohammad
want to stay in U.S.

APPENDIX B

1. Age: (Check one) 18-20 ___, 21-23 ___, 24-26 ___, Over 26 ___

2. Marital Status: Single ___, Married ___, Divorced ___

3. Sex: Male ___, Female ___

4. Native Country: _____

5. Country of Citizenship: _____

6. If you are not a U.S. citizen, do you plan to become a U.S. citizen? Yes ___ No ___

7. Native Language: _____

8. If English is not your native language, how much formal training in the English language have you had? (Please explain) _____
_____

9. Did you live in the United States prior to coming to SDSU? Yes ___ No ___

10. If you answered "Yes" to question #9, how long? (check one) Less than one year ___, 1-2 years ___, 3-4 years ___, 5 years or more ___

11. Religious preference _____

12. Class Standing: (Check one) Freshman ___, Sophomore ___, Junior ___, Senior ___, Graduate ___

13. Academic Major: _____

14. Do you belong to any international or foreign student organizations? Yes ___ No ___

15. If you answered "Yes" to question #14, what international student organizations do you belong to?
_____

16. What semester did you first take Speech 101? 1 ___, 2 ___, 3 ___, 4 ___, 5 ___, 6 ___, 7 ___, 8 ___, Other ___

17. Have you attempted to take this course, Speech 101, at SDSU before this semester? Yes ___ No ___

18. If you answered "Yes" to question #17, how many times? _____

19. How would you rate your interpersonal relationships with other students in the class? Excellent ___, Very Good ___, Good ___, Fair ___, Poor ___, Very Poor ___

20. Why do you feel this way? _____
_____

21. How would you rate your interpersonal relationships with the instructor? Excellent ___, Very Good ___, Good ___, Fair ___, Poor ___, Very Poor ___

22. Why do you feel this way? _____
_____

23. How often do you meet with your instructor? For each assignment ___, Once a week ___, Whenever I need help ___, Almost never ___, Never ___

24. How often do you seek help from other students in the class? Often ___, Seldom ___, Never ___

25. How often do you seek help from students who have previously taken the class? Often ___, Seldom ___, Never ___

26. Is your class formant lecture-lab? That is, does the class meet twice a week with one instructor and have mass lecture as the other class meeting?
Yes ___ No ___

27. What is the most difficult thing about the course?
_____

28. What is the greatest contribution the course has made to you? _____

29. Do you have any recommendations about improving the course? If yes, what are they?